

Town life

In 1700 England and Wales had a population of about 5.5 million. This had increased very little by 1750, but then grew quickly to about 8.8 million by the end of the century. Including Ireland and Scotland, the total population was about 13 million.

In 1700 England was still a land of small villages. In the northern areas of England, in Lancashire and West Yorkshire, and in the West Midlands, the large cities of the future were only just beginning to grow. By the middle of the century Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield and Leeds were already large. But such new towns were still treated as villages and so had no representation in Parliament.

All the towns smelled bad. There were no drains. Streets were used as lavatories and the dirt was seldom removed. In fact people added to it, leaving in the streets the rubbish from the marketplace and from houses. The streets were muddy and narrow, some only two metres wide. Around London and other larger towns a few vegetable growers took the dirt from the streets to put on their fields.

The towns were centres of disease. As a result only one child in four in London lived to become an adult. It was the poor who died youngest. They were buried together in large holes dug in the ground. These were not covered with earth until they were full. It was hardly surprising that poor people found comfort in drinking alcohol and in trying to win money from card games. Quakers, shocked by the terrible effects of gin drinking, developed the beer industry in order to replace gin with a less damaging drink.

During the eighteenth century, efforts were made to make towns healthier. Streets were built wider, so that carriages drawn by horses could pass each other. From 1734, London had a street lighting system. After 1760 many towns asked Parliament to allow them to tax their citizens in order to provide social services, such as street cleaning and lighting. Each house owner had to pay a local tax, the amount or "rate" of which was decided by the local council or corporation.

Catholics and Jews were still not allowed into Parliament, and for Nonconformists it continued to be difficult, but they were all able to belong to the town councils that were now being set up. As these "local authorities" grew, they brought together the merchants and industrial leaders. These started to create a new administrative class to carry out the council's will. Soon London and the other towns were so clean and tidy that they became the wonder of Europe. Indeed London had so much to offer that the great literary figure of the day, Samuel Johnson, made the now famous remark, "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life. For there is in London all that life can afford."

There were four main classes of people in eighteenth-century towns: the wealthy merchants; the ordinary merchants and traders; the skilled craftsmen; and the large number of workers who had no skill and who could not be sure of finding work from one day to another.

The rich

Social conditions were probably better than in any other country in Europe. British aristocrats had less power over the poor than European aristocrats had. In 1760 an English lord was actually hanged for

killing his servant. There were few places in Europe where that would have happened. To foreigners, used to the absolute power of the king and his nobles, English law seemed an example of perfect justice, even if it was not really so.

Foreigners noticed how easy it was for the British to move up and down the social "ladder". In London a man who dressed as a gentleman would be treated as one. It was difficult to see a clear difference between the aristocracy, the gentry and the middle class of merchants. Most classes mixed freely together.

However, the difference between rich and poor could be very great. The duke of Newcastle, for example, had an income of £100,000 each year.

The workers on his lands were lucky if they were paid more than £15 a year.

The comfortable life of the gentry must have been dull most of the time. The men went hunting and riding, and carried out "improvements" to their estates. During the eighteenth century these improvements included rebuilding many great houses in the classical style. It was also fashionable to arrange natural-looking gardens and parks to create a carefully made "view of nature" from the windows of the house. Some of the gentry became interested in collecting trees or plants from abroad.

Women's lives were more boring, although during the winter there were frequent visits to London, where dances and parties were held. But even the

richest women's lives were limited by the idea that they could not take a share in more serious matters. They were only allowed to amuse themselves. As one lord wrote: "Women are only children of larger growth . . . A man of sense only plays with them . . . he neither tells them about, nor trusts them, with serious matters."

During the eighteenth century, people believed that the natural spring waters in "spa" towns such as Bath were good for their health. These towns became fashionable places where most people went to meet other members of high society. Bath, which is still the best example of an eighteenth-century English city, was filled with people who wished to be "seen". In Scotland a "New Town" on the edge of the old city of Edinburgh was built by Scotland's great architect, Robert Adam. Like Bath, it represented the height of eighteenth-century British civilised life.

The countryside

The cultural life of Edinburgh was in total contrast with life in the Scottish Highlands. Because the kilt and tartan were forbidden, everyone born since 1746 had grown up wearing Lowland (English) clothes. The old way of colouring and making tartan patterns from local plants had long been forgotten. By the time the law forbidding the kilt and tartan was abolished in 1782, it was too late.

Highland dress and tartans became fancy dress, to be worn by Scottish soldiers and by lovers of the past, but not by the real Highlanders. Very few of the tartans that were worn after 1782 would have been recognised as "clan" tartans by the men who had fought at Culloden.

The real disaster in the Highlands, however, was economic. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the clan chiefs began to realise that money could be made from sheep for the wool trade. They began to push the people off the clan lands, and to replace them with sheep, a process known as the clearances. The chiefs treated the clan lands as their personal property, and the law supported them, just as it supported the enclosure of common land in England. Between 1790 and 1850 hundreds of thousands of Highlanders lost their old way of life so that their chiefs could make a profit from the land. Many Highlanders, men, women and children, lived poor on the streets of Glasgow. Others went to begin a new life, mainly in Canada, where many settled with other members of their clan. A smaller number went to Australia in the nineteenth century. Clan society in the Highlands had gone for ever.

In England the countryside changed even more than the towns in the eighteenth century. Most farming at the beginning of the century was still done as it had been for centuries. Each village stood

in the middle of three or four large fields, and the villagers together decided what to grow, although individuals continued to work on their own small strips of land.

During the eighteenth century most of this land was enclosed. The enclosed land was not used for sheep farming, as it had been in Tudor times, but for mixed animal and cereal farms. People with money and influence, such as the village squire, persuaded their MP to pass a law through Parliament allowing them to take over common land and to enclose it. The MP was willing to do this because the landowner was often able to help him at the next election with the votes of those who worked for him.

One main cause of these enclosures was that a number of the greater landlords, including the aristocracy, had a great deal of money to invest. This had come partly from profits made from increased trade, especially with the West Indies and with India. It also came from investment in coal mines and ironworks, both of which had a growing part of the economy. Finally, some aristocrats had purchased development sites on the edge of London, most notably the dukes of Bedford and Westminster.

Most of them wanted to invest their money on the land, and having improved their own land, and built fine country houses, they looked to other land. Their reason was that farming had become much more profitable. From the mid-seventeenth century there had been a number of improvements in farming, and a growth of interest in farming methods. Britain and Holland were better at farming than any other country in Europe. At the beginning of the eighteenth century a "seed drill", a machine for sowing corn seed in straight lines and at fixed intervals, was invented by Jethro Tull. This made fields easier to weed, and made it possible to produce a greater crop. Other farmers had started to understand how to improve soil. At the same time, root crops grown in Holland were introduced in Britain.

Traditionally the land had been allowed to rest every three years. But by growing root crops one

year, animal food the next, and wheat the third, farmers could now produce more. Growing animal food also made it possible to keep animals through the winter. This was an important new development. Before the mid-eighteenth century most animals were killed before winter because there was never enough food to keep them until the following spring. For the first time people could now eat fresh meat all the year round.

These improvements, however, were a good deal more difficult to introduce when most farmland was still organised by the whole village community as it had been for centuries. No strip farmer could afford the necessary machinery, and it was not worth buying machinery for such small amounts of land in three different areas around the village. Richer farmers wanted to change the system of farming, including the system of landholding. With one large area for each farm the new machinery and methods would work very well. They had the money to do this, and could expect the help of the village squire and their MP, who were also rich farmers with the same interests. They had a strong economic argument for introducing change because

it was clear that the new methods would produce more food for each acre of land than the traditional methods. There was also another strong reason, though at the time people may not have realised it. The population had started to grow at a greatly increased rate.

The enclosures, and the farming improvements from which they resulted, made possible far greater and more efficient food production than could be found in almost any other country in Europe. The records of Britain's largest meat market, Smithfield in London, show the extraordinary improvement in animal farming. In 1710 the average weight of an ox was 168 kg, by 1795 it was 364 kg. During the same period the average weight of a sheep in Smithfield rose from 17 kg to 36 kg.

Improved use of land made it possible to grow wheat almost everywhere. For the first time everyone, including the poor, could eat white wheat bread. White bread was less healthy than brown, but the poor enjoyed the idea that they could afford the same bread as the rich. In spite of the greatly increased production of food, however, Britain could no longer feed itself by the end of the century. Imported food from abroad became necessary to feed the rapidly growing population.

But in social terms the enclosures were damaging. Villagers sometimes knew nothing about an enclosure until they were sent off the land. Some had built their homes on common land and these were destroyed. Over one thousand parliamentary Acts resulted in the enclosure of about four million acres in the second half of the century. Many of the poor thought this was no better than stealing:

They hang the man and flog the woman,
That steals the goose from off the common,
But leave the greater criminal loose
That steals the common from the goose.

The enclosures changed the look of much of the countryside. Instead of a few large fields there were now many smaller fields, each encircled with a hedge, many with trees growing in them.

The problem of the growing landless class was made very much worse by the rapid increase in

population in the second half of the century. Some were able to work with the new farming class. Others were not able to find work. Many of these had to depend on the help of the Poor Laws, first introduced by Queen Elizabeth I.

Another problem was that there were several years of bad harvests which resulted in a sharp increase in wheat prices. Local magistrates could have fixed wages to make sure the poor could afford to eat. But in many places, they chose instead to help those whose wages were particularly low out of the local rates. The most famous example was in a village called Speenhamland, and the "Speenhamland Act" was copied in many parts of the country. It was a disastrous system, because employers were now able to employ people cheaply knowing that the parish would have to add to the low wages they paid. Some employers even lowered their wages after the Speenhamland Act. It is not surprising that as a result the national cost of helping the poor rose from £2 million in 1790 to £4 million in 1800.

Another effect of the Speenhamland Act was to increase the growth of the population. Help was given to a family according to the number of children. Before the enclosures farmers had smaller families because the land had to be divided among the children, and because young men would not marry until they had a farm of their own. The enclosures removed the need for these limits, and the Speenhamland Act encouraged larger families since this meant an increase in financial help.

Neighbouring parishes joined together to build a "parish workhouse" where most of the poor were fed and housed. Some parishes hired the workhouse and its population to a local businessman who wanted cheap workers. He provided food in return for work. This quickly led to a system little better than slavery, with children as well as adults being made to work long hours. These effects brought about the collapse of the old Poor Law and led to a new law in 1834.

Other people left their village and went to the towns to find work. They provided the energy that made possible an even greater revolution which was to change the face of Britain.

Family life

In the eighteenth century families began to express affection more openly than before. In addition it seems that for the first time children were no longer thought of as small adults, but as a distinct group of people with special needs. A century after the Quaker, Penn, there was a growing voice advising gentleness with children. One popular eighteenth-century handbook on the upbringing of children, itself a significant development, warned: "Severe and frequent whipping is, I think, a very bad practice." In 1798 another handbook told mothers that "The first object in the education of a child should be to acquire its affection, and the second to obtain its confidence. The most likely thing to expand a youthful mind is . . . praise."

Girls, however, continued to be victims of the parents' desire to make them match the popular idea of feminine beauty of slim bodies, tight waists and a pale appearance. To achieve this aim, and so improve the chances of a good marriage, parents forced their daughters into tightly waisted clothes, and gave them only little food to avoid an

unfashionably healthy appearance. Undoubtedly this behaviour explains the idea and reality of frail feminine health which continued into the nineteenth century.

Parents still often decided on a suitable marriage for their children, but they increasingly sought their children's opinion. However, sons and daughters often had to marry against their wishes. One man, forced to give up the only woman he ever loved, wrote, "I sighed as a lover, but I obeyed as a son." But love and companionship were slowly becoming accepted reasons for marriage. As one husband wrote to his wife after fifteen years of marriage, "I have only time to say that I love you dearly, – best of women, best of wives, and best of friends." If such feelings described a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century marriage they were less openly stated, and perhaps less openly expected.

The increase in affection was partly because people could now expect a reasonably long life. This resulted mainly from improved diet and the greater cleanliness of cotton rather than woollen underclothing. However, it was also the result of a

growing idea of kindness. For perhaps the first time people started to believe that cruelty either to humans or animals was wrong. It did not prevent bad factory conditions, but it did help those trying to end slavery. At the root of this dislike of cruelty was the idea that every human was an individual.

This growing individualism showed itself in a desire for privacy. In the seventeenth century middle-class and wealthier families were served by servants, who listened to their conversation as they ate. They lived in rooms that led one to another, usually through wide double doors. Not even the bedrooms were private. But in the eighteenth century families began to eat alone, preferring to serve themselves than to have servants listening to everything they had to say. They also rebuilt the insides of their homes, putting in corridors, so that every person in the family had their own private bedroom.

Britain was ahead of the rest of Europe in this individualism. Almost certainly this was the result of the political as well as economic strength of the middle class, and the way in which the middle class mixed so easily with the gentry and aristocracy. Individualism was important to trade and industrial success.

The most successful in trade and industry were often Nonconformists, who were especially hardworking. They could be hard on their families, as Puritan fathers had been a century earlier. But they were also ambitious for their sons, sending them away to boarding school at a young age. Removed from family affection, this kind of education increased individualism. Starved of emotional life, many of these boys grew up to put all their energy into power, either helping to build the empire, or helping to build trade and industry.

Such individualism could not exist for the poorer classes. Where women and children could find work making cloth, a worker family might double its income, and do quite well. But a poor family in which only the father could find work lived on the edge of starvation.

The Speenhamland Act was not practised everywhere. An increasing number of families had

no choice but to go to the parish workhouse. Some babies were even killed or left to die by desperate mothers. A poor woman expecting a baby was often sent out of the parish, so that feeding the mother and child became the responsibility of another parish workhouse.

The use of child labour in the workhouse and in the new factories increased towards the end of the century. This was hardly surprising. A rapidly growing population made a world of children. Children of the poor had always worked as soon as they could walk. Workhouse children were expected to learn a simple task from the age of three, and almost all would be working by the age of six or seven. They were particularly useful to factory owners because they were easy to discipline, unlike adults, and they were cheap.

Then, quite suddenly at the end of the century, child labour began to be seen as shameful. This resulted partly from the growing dislike of cruelty, and also from the fact that hard child labour became more visible and more systematic now that so many people worked in factories rather than in fields and cottages. A first blow had been struck some years earlier. Horrified by the suffering of children forced to sweep chimneys, two men campaigned for almost thirty years to persuade Parliament to pass a Regulating Act in 1788 to reduce the cruelty involved. In the nineteenth century the condition of poor children was to become a main area of social reform. This was a response not only to the fact that children were suffering more, but also that their sufferings were more public.